

## **New Shetland radar to better protect UK's northern airspace**

A new Royal Air Force radar facility reinforcing the UK's ability to track unidentified military or civilian aircraft will be powered up ready to operate soon, the head of the RAF heard today (26 January).

Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Stephen Hillier, visited the site of the new £10m Remote Radar Head facility, at Saxa Vord, Unst, Shetland, to inspect its progress.

This radar will improve RAF and NATO understanding of the airspace north of Britain and further out across the Norwegian Sea, improving the UK's sovereign capability at a time of heightened Russian military activity. It will see the island return to the role it performed during the 1960s and '70s, when the site was used as an early warning radar on NATO's northern flank.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson commented: *'We will always protect our skies from Russian aggression. This radar is a vital part of the UK's defences as we react to intensifying global threats and reinforce our ability to tackle them. Russia's actions are not limited to Europe's eastern borders – the threat to British livelihoods is severe and real.'*

Air Chief Marshal Sir Stephen Hillier, Chief of the Air Staff, added: *'The radar system at Saxa Vord is an important part of ensuring that the RAF can fully protect both the UK's airspace and that of our NATO allies, in the face of increasing pressure from Russia.'*

*'Right at the tip of Shetland, Saxa Vord is a very remote site, so I am extremely grateful to the team who have been working hard through the cold of winter, with snow and 120 mph gales, to ensure that the construction has remained on schedule.'* (**See illustration**).

The Saxa Vord Radar head will provide key information on aircraft movements to the north of the UK and feed the nationwide Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) operation which is responsible for policing international and UK airspace from RAF Lossiemouth in Moray and RAF Coningsby in Lincolnshire, as well as supporting civil air traffic control.

During the last five years, the RAF has carried out 69 QRA launches. Just last week (15 January), two Typhoon aircraft from RAF Lossiemouth were scrambled to intercept two approaching Russian military aircraft (**also illustrated here**) which did not respond to the air traffic control authorities.

The RAF monitored the jets as they passed through international airspace, before escorting the Russian Blackjacks out of the UK's area of interest. At no time did the Russian bombers enter UK sovereign airspace.

Defence, Equipment and Support, the MOD's procurement organisation, managed the redevelopment of the site and delivered the new infrastructure and capability for the RAF, commissioning the works through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) Services. The Saxa Vord remote radar head will be operated remotely by RAF personnel and contractors will only attend the site for maintenance.

Simon Dakin, Director Intelligence Surveillance Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance, for Defence Equipment and Support, reflected: *'The Air Defence and Electronic Warfare Delivery Team has shown outstanding innovation and teamwork to deliver this vital capability ahead of time and within budget.'*

During his two day visit to Shetland, Sir Stephen Hillier also toured the adjacent Saxa Vord RAF and Exhibition Centre and met representatives from Shetland Islands Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Sullom Voe and Shetland Space Centre Ltd, as well as delivery personnel from FCO Services & ADEWS, Brody-Forbes, 90 SU, Serco, Mobile Met Unit and McDonald Scaffolding.

Scotland is home to more than 10,000 regular and 4,000 reserve armed forces personnel, while Scottish industry benefits from defence spending £1.5bn with it each year. This investment supports 9,750 private sector and highly skilled jobs in Scotland.

### **The Royal Air Force at Saxa Vord**

The RAF's first presence on Unst was the establishment of a Chain Home radar station at Skaw in 1940. By the end of 1940, the Royal Navy had also established a radar site on the island, at Saxa Vord. This second site was passed to the RAF on 1 July 1943, although it continued to be operated by the Navy for the time being.

By March 1945, Saxa Vord was equipped as a Chain Home Low station, watching for low-level aircraft. The site was updated, and reopened in the summer of 1958 as part of NATO's radar coverage. The site continued to be modernised and up-dated until it was once again placed on a Care and Maintenance basis in March 2006. The RAF contributed significantly to the island of Unst. They were the first to install mains water and electricity, while the station personnel also provided valuable services to the local community. In the 1970s at least, the station provided the island's ambulance and fire services,

and its only dentist. At its height, some 300 service personnel and their families lived on the island.

### **Dynamic Security Threats**

**This week (week ending 27 January) at the Royal United Services Institution's Dynamic Security Threats and the British Army conference, the Chief of the General Staff (CGS) General Sir Nick Carter echoed the views of the Chief of Air Staff, warning that the UK must keep up with its adversaries or risk being less capable of competing on the battlefield.**

**CGS highlighted that while the traditional threat remains and last year it was reported that had Russia had undertaken simulated attacks across Northern Europe (from Kaliningrad to Lithuania), Britain and her Allies must also look closely at how countries are now being more creative in how they exploit the seams between peace and war.**

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